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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a simple model of the communication process and discusses the transmission of meaning from the sender to the receiver of a message. The model is applied to the library organization, and problems which may arise from various interpretations of messages are considered. The relationship between information and meaning is then examined. The communication of meaning and the transformation of the ideation inherent in the members of the organization into an ideology to be shared are identified as leadership roles. Coincident and equifinal meanings and their roles in organizational communication are explored, and it is concluded that success in a library depends on the initiative of meaning as both a function and a definition of leadership. (14 references) (MES)

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LEADING THROUGH MEANING:

ELEMENTS OF A COMMUNICATION PROCESS

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LEADING THROUGH MEANING:

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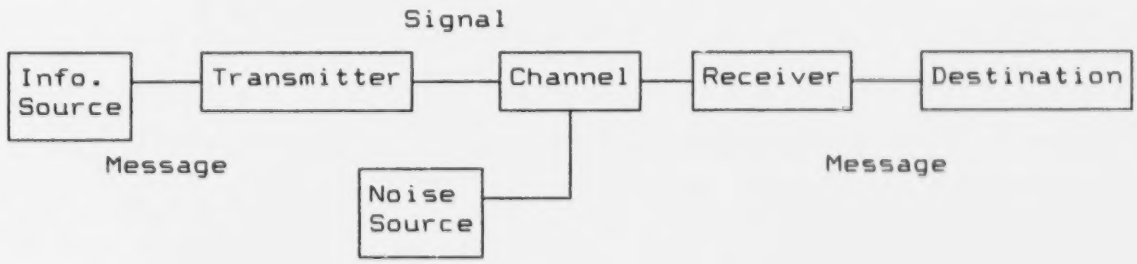
Implicit in the theme of this year's conference and of this session of papers is the suggestion that leadership can be defined and, once defined, leadership's behavior of communication can be observed. It seems that leadership is most frequently defined by outward characteristics, including, and perhaps especially, by behavior with regard to communication. As Chester Bernard wrote in 1938,

> In an exhaustive theory of organization, communication would occupy a central place, because the structure, extensiveness, and scope of the organization are almost entirely determined by communication techniques.[1]

All management and organizational functions, indeed all human functions, depend on the process of communication. Back in 1949 Warren Weaver offered a rather simple model of communication:[2]



One of the basic problems with communication is semantic, according to Weaver. That is, a problem may arise "with the interpretation of meaning by the receiver, as compared with the intended meaning of the sender."[3] There is no guarantee that what the sender of a message intends is what the receiver of that message understands.

It must be stressed that the act of communication does not involve the transmission of meaning. In any communication (technical or human), it is a message that is transmitted. Meaning is usually implied by the sender of the message and inferred by the receiver. There are a number of implications inherent in a discussion of meaning, as David Berlo points out.[4] First, a message received acts as an internal stimulus and results in an internal response on the part of the receiver. Second, along with internal factors which may affect the receiver's inference of meaning, external forces may also enhance or impinge upon meaning formation. Third, in order for meaning to be inferred from a message, the receiver must share some points of reference with the sender. Fourth, meaning is not temporally fixed; the passage of time and the accumulation of experience and other stimuli may contribute to changed inferences of meaning. Finally, meaning is not spatially fixed; when a message is received by more than one person, the possibilities for uniquely inferred meanings (to a degree) increase as the number of receiver increases.

In light of these implications it seems that there are forces acting to reduce the probability of meaning inference, or inferred meaning closely resembling implied meaning. In fact, Niklas Luhman suggests that some inevitable obstacles render meaning improbable from the outset:

> The first improbability is that, given the separateness and individuality of human consciousness, one person can understand what another means. The second improbability relates to the reaching of recipients. . . . The third improbability is the improbability of success. Even if a communication is understood, there can be no assurance of its being accepted.[5]

We can be thankful that improbability is reduced by some characteristics of communication. "Redundancy [within the process of communication] exists and entropy is reduced because [communication] constitutes a Markov process, whereby the future state is dependent upon the present."[6] If this were not true, the communication process could well result in a chaotic and anarchic situation.

With the aforementioned obstacles to meaning, it seems that the odds are against success in an organization. Anything that gets in the way of the message formulated and dispensed by the library leader to the other members of the organization can inhibit the transmission of meaning. As is hinted at in the

discussion of inference of meaning, though, a primary principle of phenomenology dictates that meaning, like knowledge, is subjective. The receiver of a message employs personal, experiential, and sometimes idiosyncratic means in interpreting the message. With both internal and external obstacles at work, it is important to examine the leader's creation and transmission of the message.

A basic question remains: Can a leader emerge within an organization such as a library where the purpose of the organization is unclear, where no discernible meaning exists? It is put forth here that leadership formation is not possible where meaning is not conveyed. Every organization, every library has a top administrator, a chief executive officer, a director. Not every organization, not every library has a leader. Leadership cannot be assigned or selected on the basis of position or rank within an organization. Linda Smircich and Gareth Morgan note that "Individuals in groups that evolve [common modes of interpretation and shared understandings of experience] attribute leadership to those members who structure experience in meaningful ways."[7]

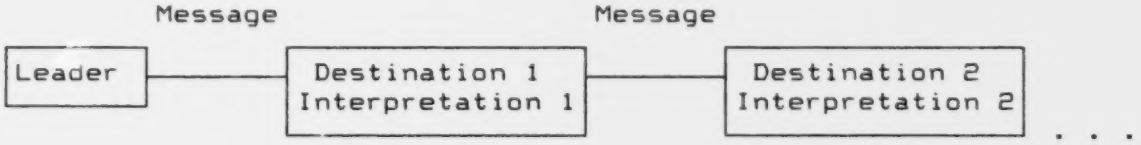
The qualities of an individual which identify that person as a leader may be many and varied. One person recognized as a leader may share relatively few characteristics with another such person, even in the area of communication styles. One may be an eloquent spokesman for his or her beliefs and vision for the

direction of the library; another may be able to represent graphically a sense of unified action. Whatever mode of operation or means of communication the leader chooses to employ, "The effective leader must assemble for the organization a vision of a desired future state,"[8] as Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus suggest. This may be accomplished through rhetoric, symbology, or any other tool deemed useful and wielded successfully.

Recalling the model of the communication process, mentioned earlier, we can now impart roles to some of the entities represented. The leader of the library organization, in exercising his or her ability to construct meaning and vision, assumes the part of information source. According to the model, this is the genesis of signal transmission, at which time a message, created by the leader is sent to the destination, the members of the library organization. One of the problems with the process is that there is intervention between source and destination. The external intervention can be considerably reduced if the library leader is communicating directly with a member of the organization. With additional levels or steps placed between source and destination, the probably of success is lessened.

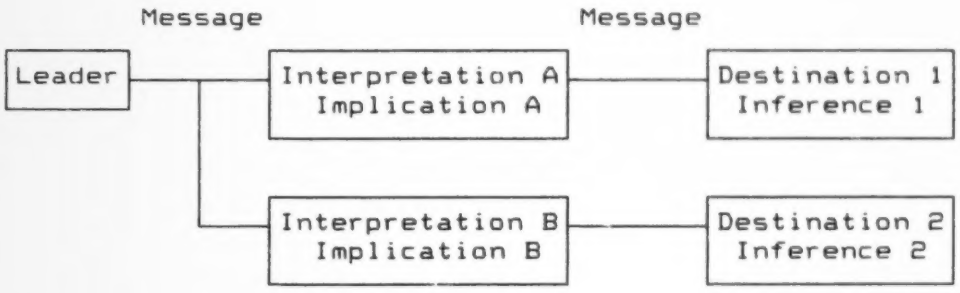
The external intervention may make necessary interpretation (or inference) by one or more members of the organization, then translation of that interpretation into implied meaning. At that point the message, or some mutation of the message, is

communicated to other members of the organization. The more interventions of this sort, the further is the final destination from the initial source. Also, meaning formation may be repeated several times and may not be consistent. Because of this there is likely to be implied meaning, followed by inferred meaning, then a second implied meaning based on the first inference, followed by a second inference of meaning, and so on. By the time communication reaches the final destination, usually the lower levels of the organizational hierarchy, the message received and the meaning inferred may not resemble the intention of the leader. The following model illustrates this phenomenon:



If we accept that the communication of meaning is an essential quality of a leader, the model implies that meaning, and therefore leadership, can be diffused by the interpositioning of stages between the leader's message as initially articulated and other members of an organization. What occurs in such a situation is a lack or loss of control of meaning formation (to the extent that meaning formation can be controlled at all). The leader, or would-be leader, delegates the implication of meaning to other members of the organization. For example, if the director of a library constructs a message in which he or she

seeks to establish a reason for restructuring the organization of the library, but communicates that message only to the assistant and/or associate directors of the library, the director leaves it to these others to infer meaning from the message and to reconstruct the message for the staff of the library. What is eventually communicated may not embody the vision of the director and, furthermore, may not be consistent from one assistant director to another, as is depicted in a third model.



These models emphasize the assertion made by Michael Maccoby in The Leader: "Leadership is achieved only by those who understand both their particular environment, including its social character, and their own capabilities."[7] It is essential that the library leader understand the structure of the organization and be able to alter that structure, when necessary, in order to realize the vision he or she establishes. Of course, in order to accomplish such a goal, the leader must formulate a vision for the library that is at the same time realistic, challenging, and conducive to articulation. The elements of that vision are fodder for consideration and examination elsewhere.

It is more than axiomatic that library managers are decision-makers. In order to make decisions managers have to be efficient at gathering and assimilating information. It is also important, from the perspective of leadership, that essential information be imparted by management and reach relevant segments of the organization. Does this information constitute communication of meaning? It does not, for reasons which pertain to the natures of information and meaning. As Peter Drucker states, "Where communication is perception, information is logic. As such, information is purely formal and has no meaning."[16] The difference between meaning and information is demonstrated in many segments of society, such as politics. One may argue, for example, that, as President of the United States, Jimmy Carter was more efficient at gathering and assimilating information than is Ronald Reagan. Reagan, however, upon becoming President, was able to turn ideation into ideology (more on which transformation will be said later) and to communicate the meaning of his policies to many inside and outside of government.

The difference between information and meaning is something of a dichotomy which can lead to what Orrin Klapp refers to as "meaning lag," expressed as a relationship between

> . . . on the one hand, mere information conceived as reduction of uncertainty in any binary (yes-or-no) choice, commonly measured in bits; and, on the other, meaning as information about the relation of something to

> a pattern or scheme of which one is part--an awareness that is necessarily subjective. Mere information that is additive, digital, analytical, accumulates easily by being counted or categorized; whereas meaning, being subjective, and referring to synthetic or holistic properties that cannot be reduced to the sum of parts, might be called a higher sort of information that does not come easily, let alone inevitably, from a growing heap of mere information.[11]

In case a potential leader is tempted to try to foster meaning by increasing the amount of information transmitted to members of the organization, he or she should be warned that the opposite of the desired effect may occur. In fact, the over-abundance of information may act as a source of noise, interfering not only with the transmission of a message, but also with the sharing of meaning. Information and meaning are not unrelated; information must be communicated for meaning to be implied and inferred. Weaver makes a suggestion, though, regarding the relationship.

> One has the vague feeling that information and meaning may prove to be something like a pair of canonically conjugate variables in quantum theory, that is, that information and meaning may be subject to some joint

> restriction that compels the sacrifice of one if you insist on having much of the other.[18]

The above does not denigrate the importance of information in the organization. The flow of information (including the direction of the flow) does not necessarily need to emulate the communication process designed to impart meaning, though. Information, being logical, formal, frequently technical, can originate anywhere within the organization and need not be communicated to all segments of the organization. Information, however, is, more often than not, related to a function of the library, to a task performed, to a given situation. Meaning, based on rhetoric, is hierarchically superior to information as used above; the function to which information applies depends upon the meaning established by the leader.

That meaning, which is communicated to all segments of the organization (a communication that is uni-directional), is based on the vision for the library, discussed earlier. Meaning, that is, implied meaning, begins as an idea in the leader's mind. That idea may be a restructuring of the library, a redefinition of the service goals, an incorporation of technology into the traditional mission. The idea is then developed by the leader to ensure clarity of concept and of statement. Meaning has its genesis with the clarity of thought and purpose with which the leader imbues the idea. In order to communicate meaning the leader must transform the ideation inherent in the members of the

organization into an ideology to be shared. Ideology is used here to mean a systematic body of concepts common to the organizational culture.

The members of the library organization comprise a disparate group, an agglomeration of individuals with separate sets of experiences and beliefs. These individuals may also have differing notions regarding the purpose of the library. What is shared is the confluence of professional ideals, principles, and premises. These are sufficient to suggest a certain amount of agreement among individuals, but it is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for complete agreement regarding specific organizational objectives within a library. It is highly likely that meaning can be shared throughout an organization to the extent that disagreement and dispute are eliminated. The leader's task is to provide direction to both agreement and disagreement so that the vision is not obscured and that personal and organizational goals can be seen to act in concert.

Bennis and Nanus maintain that "Leaders articulate and define what has previously remained implicit and unsaid; then they invent images, metaphors, and models that provide a focus for new attention."[13] The first part of their statement may be an overly optimistic view of the potential directedness of the organization. The organization conforming to their assessment is one which has an innate, or perhaps inert, intuition regarding purpose and direction; all that is needed is someone to give

substance to the previously formless notions. A more likely scenario is one which embodies conflict and confusion to some extent. The leader in such an environment assumes a more active role, one which involves more than the awakening of a dormant, yet extant, sense of meaning. As has been stated, the leader is a communicator, an architect of meaning.

The simile of leader as architect is not original here. The concept of a leader as one able to transform the social architecture of an organization is used by Bennis and Nanus. The keystone of this architecture is meaning as is implied in their three-stage construction process:

1. Create a new and compelling vision capable of bringing the work force to a new place.
2. Develop commitment for the new vision.
3. Institutionalize the new vision.[14]

This and other ideas put forth in this paper tacitly assume a beneficence inherent in leadership. In fact, an underlying definition of leadership at work here includes the premise that, since the leader is involved in constructing meaning which has as its end the goal of a library centered on clarity of purpose, the leader is beneficent, or he or she would not be a leader. While all of this precludes malignance, another interpretation of meaning and leadership focuses on the leader from the perspective of domination. John B. Thompson, for instance, states that

> there is evidence to suggest that very few values and beliefs are shared or accepted by all (or even most) members of a modern industrial society [and that individuals] may be enmeshed in a system of domination without recognizing that they are, or without recognizing the extent to which they are, subjected to the power of others.[15]

Thompson's interpretation hints that an absence of meaning (or the presence of confusion) is an opportunity for the ascension to a position of power by one who is able to coalesce confusion into a shared ideology. He further states that to examine this phenomenon is "to study the ways in which meaning (or signification) serves to sustain relations of domination."[16]

Perhaps the suggestions of Bennis and Nanus and of Thompson are overstated. The leader may be neither a guiding light illuminating the path of the masses with the brilliance of an idea nor a machiavellian, achieving domination through the willingness of the masses to embrace an interpretation of meaning. For one thing, each of the views hints at an ease with which implied meaning becomes inferred meaning and is accepted by members of the organization. Each also implies a static nature for meaning; once communicated and accepted, the direction of the organization is set. Early in this paper reference was made to the communication <u>process</u>. Process is not static; it is dynamic and fluid. It was also stated earlier that meaning is not fixed.

Yet another complication is the fact that an organization such as a library is dynamic as well. Its processes are neither temporally nor spatially fixed. One way in which this potential difficulty manifests itself is the incorporation of new members into the library organization. The socialization process by which these individuals attain full membership may or may not include inference of meaning. Success, from the library perspective, is more likely when the communication process does not exclude these individuals.

How, then, can meaning be an effective tool in an organization? The literature of organization theory includes some possibilities. One way may be through the genesis and development of coincident meaning. Barbara Gray, Michel Bougon, and Anne Donnellon elaborate on this notion.

> Meanings come to coincide when, through the course of regular social interaction, members begin to favor one subjective interpretation over others. In this way members generate coincident expectations about patterns of reciprocal behavior. Repeated confirmation (by oneself and by others) that those reciprocal behaviors produce the anticipated outcomes leads members to assign meaning to the behavior. . . .
>
> When expectations and actual behaviors among members repeatedly coincide, and if they are consistent with members' explicit and tacit self-interests, then the

> interpretive schemes underlying them become crystallized.[17]

Coincident meaning can constitute a rather fragile state for the library. The forces which acted to cause meanings to coincide could act to cause them to diverge. In an environment governed by coincident meaning there are competing or contradictory meanings which can lead to the deconstruction of meaning for the organization. It is the leader's task to control these contradictory meanings, to communicate an implied meaning which can be incorporated into the actions of the library staff.

An alternative to shared meaning may exist and may be effective at generating outcomes desired by the leader. This alternative is what Donnellon, Gray, and Bougon term "equifinal meaning."

> Equifinal meanings. . . are interpretation that are dissimilar but that have similar behavioral implications. When organized action follows the expression of such dissimilar interpretations, we refer to these interpretations as equifinal meanings. That is, organization members may have different reasons for undertaking the action and different interpretations of the action's potential outcomes, but they nonetheless act in an organized manner.[18]

This situation is even more fragile than that governed by coincident meaning. It is yet one more remove from true shared meaning (that is, conceptualization of the vision of the leader and action based accordingly). Equifinal meaning may be seen as functionally apposite to shared meaning, but it is quite different cognitively and motivationally. In fact, equifinal meaning may be largely accidental. As such, the behavior of the members of the organization could diverge if action is altered, even though original interpretation may be consistent. In the short term equifinal meaning may be effective, but there is less motivation (conscious or unconscious) for organized action.

Some of the purposes of this paper have been to point out some basic characteristics of the communication process, some of the difficulties or obstacles inherent in organizational communication, and the importance of meaning as a component of the communication process and to organizational effectiveness. One of the functions of meaning formation is the minimization of what Michael D. Cohen and James G. March call "organized anarchy."[17] Meaning formation succeeds to the extent that it can marshal unity of concept and clarity of purpose into organized action. The leader's role in this process is primary; the initial cognitive structure of meaning belongs to the leader and it is up to him or her to communicate that meaning to the members of the organization. The difficulties of the process and functional alternatives have also been illustrated. In isolated

instances or short-term action the alternatives may present a facade of success, but it is important to keep in mind Klapp's admonition, which serves as an effective closing caveat, "In a crisis of meaning, people find much that doesn't make sense, little that is basic or reliable to hold onto [sic]."[22] Success in a library depends, not merely on the avoidance of crisis, but on the initiative of meaning, which is both a function and a definition of leadership.

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